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### Who Owns Central Park?

**How Frederick Law Olmsted's 843 acres of civilizing wilderness became a type-A battleground.**

- By Gabriel Sherman
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Image composed from the loop in Central Park.  
(Photo: Peter Funch)

**I**t's shortly before six on a recent morning in Central Park. Dogs frolic, off-leash, through meadows. Joggers breeze along the roadways. In the half-lit hours just past dawn, the park is the urban idyll that its founders, Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux, envisioned at the park's birth, 150 years ago.

But then you hear it, approaching in the distance, a stiff wind rustling leaves. The presence grows louder and crescendos until—*whoooooosh*—they're upon you: a teeming pack of cyclists bursting around the corner in a flash of neon spandex. Runners brandish their fists—or middle finger. Dogs and their owners scramble across the road, lest they be run down by the onrushing horde. It is every biker, runner, or canine for him, her, or itself. Before many New Yorkers have even had their first cup of coffee, the ongoing battle for Central Park is in full swing. "People think the park is a refuge, when you're actually going into a cage match," says Chris Yerkes, a Citi staffer who races on an amateur cycling team in the park. "You can liken it to an area which has no local government, no rules," Manhattan Borough president Scott Stringer told me. The current situation is a New York City case study of the economic phenomenon known as the tragedy of the commons, whereby a shared resource is, inevitably, overexploited. Although interspersed with the tragedy are moments of high comedy.

George, stiffened when I asked about the state of dog-bike relations. "They all think it's the Tour de France," she said, recalling how a bike had clipped Barney George a couple of years ago. "When you try to cross the road, that's when they speed up like a bunch of Lance Armstrong wannabes!"

For a cyclist, however, loose dogs can be a mortal threat. Caryl Gale, an accomplished cyclist and creative director at a fashion company, slammed into an unleashed dog that darted into the middle of a bike race last summer. "It was like going into a brick wall," Gale told me. "It's ridiculous," she said, that dogs are allowed to run off-leash near the roads, and it was lucky that she walked away with only a fractured shoulder and a broken bike. Characteristically, she didn't mention what happened to the dog.

And a bicycle traveling at upwards of 40 mph is no longer a toy but a potentially deadly projectile. In August 2005, David "Tiger" Williams, a former Yale hockey star who founded the hedge-fund-trading firm Williams Trading, accidentally rode his bike into a homeless man who was crossing the road along the east side of the park during an early-morning bike race. Williams suffered compression fractures in his back. The unidentified man was killed. (Williams was not charged with any wrongdoing.)

**T**o begin to understand the pressures that have been building in Central Park in the last few years, a good place to start is about 60 blocks downtown. The Cadence Cycling & Multisport Center, set on a windswept block hard against the entrance to the Holland Tunnel, occupies a sparsely furnished 11,000-square-foot loft. The place looks like a gym dropped into the middle of an art gallery. Sober black-and-white photographs of New York sporting events adorn the walls alongside racing bikes—some costing as much as \$30,000—hanging like sculptures from racks. The cavernous training room can hold two-dozen riders spinning in place on their own bikes, and projectors hanging from the ceiling can display virtually any racecourse in the world onto three giant flat-screens set against exposed brick walls. Cadence opened its doors last year. Its founder, Jay Snider, son of the Philadelphia sports mogul Ed Snider (chairman of the Flyers and 76ers), seeks to tap a market of Wall Street clients who desire scientific training methods previously reserved for professional athletes. "It's the kind of person who does a spreadsheet for their dating life," says Alex Ostroy, the founder of the local cycling Website [nyvelocity.com](http://nyvelocity.com). "You can slice and dice the numbers all day long. It's addictive, and you can see yourself making progress."

"The type of personality who is attracted to cycling or triathlon is an addictive personality," Karim Pine, Cadence's marketing director, tells me. "I always say there is very little difference between an endurance athlete and a heroin addict. It's the same type of person who has to hit that button again to get that buzz."

**I**nside New York's tightly woven bike-racing community, there's a rift between the old-school riders and what they see as the new-money poseurs who have imported the aggression and boorishness of the trading floor. Another group of poster boys for this new breed of cyclist is a cycling club called Foundation. Founded in 2000, the team has a large contingent of Ivy League and finance types. Established teams were exclusive, with strict admissions tests based on performance, and cliquey. But Foundation's admissions policies were looser, and Central Park soon became dotted with bankers and lawyers sporting Foundation's signature fire-red jerseys. Not everyone was pleased with the upstarts. "They had a reputation for being squirrely riders," says Alex Ostroy, a coach of the NY Velocity team.

At first, Foundation floundered. Two years ago, it finished dead last in the local rankings. The team's official mission is to raise money for charity, but its members also harbored competitive ambitions, so they went out to assemble a winning squad. "They did what the Yankees do: They

For now, though, the park's users must make do with the park they have, not the one they want. "Everybody knows they're a little bit wrong here. This stuff can be fixed pretty easily if people put their heads together," Douglas Blonsky, president of the Central Park Conservancy, says.

Already, the precinct in the park is doling out tickets to bikers who ignore red lights. On a recent morning, I saw a half-dozen cyclists pulled over in the span of twenty minutes and served with \$50 tickets. Their reactions ranged from surprise to indignation.

If tensions continue to rise, the Parks Department might be forced to step in with more-drastic measures. One proposal would set up barriers at congested intersections to slow bikers and runners, a move that Parks commissioner Adrian Benepe hopes doesn't happen. "The best thing to do is to expect people to behave like adults and be respectful that your liberties aren't infringing on the rights of others," Benepe tells me. "People need to behave more like members of a shared society and less narcissistically."

Benepe's dream is as beautiful as Olmsted's park. And if you believe it's going to happen anytime in the near future, you might be interested in purchasing—cheap—a large parcel of heavily wooded real estate in the center of Manhattan.